

FEBRUARY 8, 1976

WILLIAMS/WASH

DJIBOUTI BACKGROUNDER

INTRO: THE KIDNAPPING OF ABOUT THIRTY FRENCH SCHOOLCHILDREN IN DJIBOUTI AND THE SUBSEQUENT BORDER CLASH BETWEEN FRENCH AND SOMALI TROOPS HAS AWAKENED WORLD INTEREST IN THE FRENCH AFRICAN ENCLAVE KNOWN AS THE AFARS AND ISSAS. V-O-A'S AFRICA EDITOR DAVE WILLIAMS HAS THE FOLLOWING BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE: FRANCE ANNOUNCED LAST DECEMBER THAT IT WOULD GIVE INDEPENDENCE TO THE TERRITORY OF THE AFARS AND ISSAS, FORMERLY FRENCH SOMALIA. NO DATE WAS GIVEN, BUT REPORTS IN EAST AFRICA SAY IT COULD TAKE PLACE EARLY NEXT YEAR. THE TERMS OF THE AGREEMENT WITH THE AFRICAN-RUN GOVERNMENT, LED BY ALI ARES BOURHAN, STIPULATE THAT FRANCE WILL CONTINUE TO GUARANTEE THE TERRITORY'S SECURITY AND ECONOMIC LIFE AND MOST IMPORTANTLY RETAIN ITS MILITARY BASE AT DJIBOUT. THE FRENCH TERRITORY IS STRATEGICALLY LOCATED AT THE MOUTH OF THE RED SEA AT THE GULF OF ADEN. ITS POPULATION IS AN ESTIMATED ONE HUNDRED TWENTY FIVE THOUSAND PEOPLE IN AN AREA OF ONLY TWENTY ONE THOUSAND SQUARE KILOMETERS.

IN MOST CASES, THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF INDEPENDENCE FOR AN AFRICAN NATION WOULD BE GREETED WITH REJOICING, BUT THERE ARE OMINOUS POLITICAL CLOUDS ON DJIBOUTI'S HORIZON. BOTH NEIGHBORING ETHIOPIA AND SOMALIA HAVE TRADITIONAL CLAIMS ON THE TERRITORY. SOMALIA'S CLAIM IS OF AN ETHNIC NATURE--PART OF A DESIRE TO INCORPORATE DJIBOUTI AND AREAS OF ETHIOPIA AND KENYA, WHERE SOMALI NOMADS LIVE, INTO A GREATER SOMALILAND. IN THE MID-NINETEEN SIXTIES, SOMALIA WAS PREPARED TO GO TO WAR TO CAPTURE THESE LANDS BUT HAS SINCE AGREED TO ADOPT A PEACEFUL APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM. THE NAME OF THE FRENCH TERRITORY--CALLED AFARS AND ISSAS

SINCE THE LATE NINETEEN SIXTIES--REFERS TO THE TWO ETHNIC GROUPS IN THE TERRITORY. AN ISSA IS A SOMALI, WHILE THE AFARS ARE AKIN TO THE DANAKIL TRIBE IN THE LOWLANDS OF NORTHEASTERN ETHIOPIA. IN NINETEEN SIXTY-SEVEN, FRANCE HELD A REFERENDUM IN THE TERRITORY, AND THE RESULT WAS A DECISION TO REMAIN PART OF FRANCE BUT WITH HOME RULE. THE AFAR-LED GROUP OF ALI ARES DOMINATED THE ELECTIONS. SOMALIA CLAIMED THE ELECTIONS WERE A FRAUD AND THAT NUMEROUS ISSAS WERE ROUNDED UP AND EXPELLED.

FRANCE COUNTERCHARGED THAT NUMEROUS SOMALIS HAD CROSSED ILLEGALLY INTO THE TERRITORY. IN NINETEEN SEVENTY THREE, NEW LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS WERE HELD AND ALI ARES' PARTY GAINED ALL FORTY SEATS. TWO LIBERATION GROUPS EXIST--ONE BASED IN MOGADISCIO AND THE OTHER IN THE ETHIOPIAN CITY OF DIRA DAWA. THE MOGADISCIO GROUP WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR LAST WEEK'S KIDNAPING.

ETHIOPIA HAS RENOUNCED CLAIM OVER THE TERRITORY BUT SAID IT WOULD NOT ALLOW IT TO FALL INTO SOMALI HANDS. ONE OF ETHIOPIA'S LIFELINES TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD IS THE FRANCO-ETHIOPIAN RAILWAY, RUNNING FROM ADDIS ABABA TO DJIBOUTI. IT PROVIDES CENTRAL ETHIOPIA WITH HALF OF ITS OIL AND ALL OF ITS AVIATION FUEL. BUT WHILE ETHIOPIA HAS A LARGER ARMY THAN SOMALIA, ITS FORCES WOULD BE HARD PRESSED TO STOP ANY HYPOTHETICAL SOMALI MOVE, BECAUSE OF THE SEPARATIST MOVEMENT IN ERITREA AND MINOR REBELLIONS IN A FEW PROVINCES.

THE SITUATION COULD ALSO HAVE BIG POWER IMPLICATIONS. THE UNITED STATES HAS TRADITIONALLY BEEN ETHIOPIA'S ARMS SUPPLIER. SOMALIA HAS RECEIVED CONSIDERABLE MODERN SOVIET MILITARY EQUIPMENT AND THE SOVIETS REPORTEDLY HAVE ONE--AND POSSIBLY TWO-- MILITARY BASES IN SOMALIA.

(SIGNED)